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Study Abroad Reflection Essay

Ever since I began studying Chinese as a freshman in high school, I have dreamed of traveling to Taiwan and immersing myself in its culture. My high school Chinese teacher, who is from Taiwan, described the island as beautiful, tranquil, and welcoming. That image stayed with me until the moment I stepped off the plane in the summer of 2024. Her description became my reality, and I realized that this was a place where I wanted to make a meaningful impact. I felt a strong sense of determination to commit myself to achieving Chinese fluency and a deep understanding of the culture, so that I could one day work with both the United States and Taiwan to strengthen their relationship and improve the livelihoods of people in both regions.

This program set me up for success through its structured academic design. From Monday through Friday, I followed a rigorous schedule that included three hours of Chinese language courses and tutoring sessions, as well as culture classes focused on Chinese literature and anthropology. I quickly noticed my Chinese proficiency improving, not only through formal instruction, but also through the constant, real-world opportunities to practice the language. With Chinese as the primary language spoken in Taiwan, I was challenged daily to immerse myself in Chinese-only conversations on a wide range of topics. I formed close friendships with several Taiwanese students, creating a mutually supportive environment where I could practice my Chinese while they practiced their English. The culture courses further deepened these connections by providing historical and cultural context, allowing us to engage in meaningful conversations about festivals such as the Lantern Festival and Dragon Boat Festival, Chinese history, and cross-strait relations between Taiwan and China.

As my language skills improved, I began to understand that Chinese was not just a tool, but a key that unlocked new opportunities abroad. Through language, I was able to build trust with my friends, who invited me off campus to experience their authentic culture in Taiwan. We shared family-style meals, where I learned how to order a wide variety of dishes, and traveled together to an amusement park, where I met new people and continued building cross-cultural relationships. My classmates and I were also invited to the home of a local restaurant owner, who cooked for us and taught us how to play mahjong. During this visit, we even helped give their daughter an American name, Rose. These experiences solidified my belief that language serves as a bridge between people of different cultures, allowing for meaningful connection, trust, and mutual learning.

While all of these moments are unforgettable, the most meaningful experiences my language proficiency afforded me were the deeply personal conversations I shared with my tutor. She came to me for advice about her relationship, and through those discussions, I quickly learned that dating culture in Taiwan differs greatly from that of the United States. I was able to share my perspective on how she deserved to be treated, not only by a romantic partner, but also by family and friends. I watched her understanding of relationships expand before my eyes, and I felt deeply grateful to offer even a small amount of guidance during a time when she was truly my mentor abroad. Today, we remain close friends, and in September 2025, she visited me for the first time in America.

I also had the opportunity to communicate with and educate Taiwanese elementary and middle school students. In the first weeks of the program, I volunteered at a local elementary school, where I observed a class and shared insights into life in the United States. As I moved around the classroom speaking with small groups, students played American pop songs and excitedly asked whether I recognized them; most often songs by Justin Bieber, Bruno Mars, and Katy Perry. Beyond these musical quizzes, I delivered a presentation on American culture and college life, answering thoughtful questions about my university experience and the steps they could take to pursue admission to an American college. A few weeks later, my classmates and I visited a middle school, where we gave similar presentations and were paired with small groups of students for more personal conversations. The girls I was assigned to were starstruck. They showered me with small gifts and eagerly asked to take photos together. One student even asked me to give him an American name.

These experiences revealed to me that while many Taiwanese students are deeply curious about the United States and eager to explore opportunities abroad, they often have limited exposure to authentic, firsthand perspectives. Recognizing this gap sparked a desire within me to serve as a cultural bridge on the island, helping foster greater mutual understanding between our societies.

Beyond building new relationships, I was also able to explore the island extensively. We traveled to Taipei台北 several times, where we dined at Din Tai Fung鼎泰丰, explored vibrant night markets, visited the Taipei 101台北一零一, and spent time at the Taipei Expo Center, an international cultural hub. We also traveled to Hualien花莲, a journey that took over three hours but was well worth it for the opportunity to swim in the ocean.

Another highlight was visiting the heart of Taiwan, Sun Moon Lake日月潭, where we met members of the region's Indigenous communities and listened to live traditional music. Of all the places I visited, my favorite was Jiufen九份. Despite the rain, walking through its hillside night markets beneath glowing historical lanterns was an unforgettable experience. We shared homemade dumplings that we helped prepare ourselves, celebrated a classmate's

birthday at a local restaurant where we made new friends, and stayed in a beautiful Airbnb overlooking the mountains and the coast.

Overall, this experience abroad allowed me to put eight years of Chinese study into practice and solidified my aspiration to pursue a career overseas with the goal of making a meaningful global impact. My time in Taiwan taught me not only about the island itself, but about the broader world and where we stand within it. I came to understand that the world is vast, filled with diverse cultures, places, and most importantly relationships waiting to be formed. Life is too short to follow the status quo. By broadening our horizons and embracing perspectives different from our own, we can combine cultures and ideas in ways that create a world more connected and beautiful than we ever imagined.